

## Theological Forum speech—General Assembly 2022

**Rev Dr Liam Fraser**

Moderator,

It is sometimes said that we are living through difficult times. In the Church we face decreasing numbers and finance, along with the challenges of Presbytery and parish reform. In wider society, questions about the legacy of past injustices have arisen, and how these injustices continue to haunt us, and on a global scale, an impending climate crisis threatens the lives of millions of people.

Yet while these are difficult times, difficult times present an *opportunity*, an opportunity to reflect, and ask ourselves afresh who we are, what we are for, and what God would have us do today.

The report of the Theological Forum is an attempt to do that, to respond theologically to some of the difficulties facing our Church, the people of Scotland, and the world at large, and to provide a way forward that honours Christ, builds up the Church, and serves our neighbours.

Last year saw thousands of delegates travel to Glasgow for the COP26 conference. And because the Church of Scotland has recognised the climate crisis we face, and has committed to lowering its carbon footprint, the Forum has produced a report on creation care. Rather than climate change being a purely secular matter, we believe that there are strong biblical and theological reasons for the Church to modify its thinking about creation, and to change its actions, and we hope that our report will provide a theological rationale for other initiatives being announced by the Faith Impact Forum, and other committees and forums of the Church.

If one of the lessons of creation care is that no man or woman is an island, but that each of us is connected to everyone else, that is also true of history.

At last year's Assembly my predecessor was asked by a commissioner if the Forum might investigate the question of apologising for historic wrongs, the issue of retrospective apology. The Forum agreed to investigate this matter, and the outcome of this is a short paper referenced in our report and available online through the Church's website.

Our paper *does not* make any concrete recommendations as to what historic wrongs, if any, the Church should apologise for, but is offered only as a resource to inform the reflection and deliberation of the wider Church. The report of the Faith Impact Forum, being debated tomorrow, addresses the *specific* issue of Witchcraft trials, slavery, and other historic wrongs, and there will be an opportunity to discuss those *specific* issues tomorrow.

While some matters of history have long ceased to be relevant to the life of the Church, others continue to arise decade after decade. And one of these issues is that of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

After a successful motion by the Presbytery of Melrose and Peebles, the General Assembly of 2018 instructed the Theological Forum to undertake a full review of the role of the Westminster Confession of Faith in our Church, including the vows and subscription that office holders make in relation to it. Upon presenting our interim findings, the General Assembly of 2021 instructed the Theological Forum a *second time* to examine the place of the Westminster Confession within our Church, and to return to this Assembly with firm proposals on the confessional standards of the Church.

Our proposals, in short, are these: that the Westminster Confession should be *retained* as a subordinate standard of the Church, but that the Church of Scotland should also adopt *other* subordinate standards, and house these documents within a new Book of Confessions. In addition, the vows and subscription of office holders would be modified to reflect these changes, and also to clarify the location of the fundamental doctrines of the faith.

While the General Assembly instructed the Theological Forum on two occasions to explore the issue of Confessional reform, it has been suggested to us that previous Assemblies were *wrong* to do so. It is said that during a time of great financial and organisational strain in the Church, questions of theology and vow-making are largely irrelevant, and that it does not matter what the Church officially believes or what its office holders vow or subscribe to.

As a busy parish minister, struggling with the reforms that many of us in this Assembly are struggling with, I have sympathy with this argument. Yet the Forum does *not* believe that questions of theology and faith are irrelevant to the challenges facing the Church of Scotland. On the contrary, it is by understanding our faith better, and by having confidence in the truth revealed in Jesus Christ and taught by his Church, that we will have the wisdom, and the grace, and the *strong foundation* to reach Scotland in mission. For if we do not know what we believe, or if we do not have confidence in it, then we will struggle to make the Good News heard.

While our appended report explains the rationale for our proposals in greater detail, the Forum believes that confessional reform will provide three key benefits to the Church, benefits that address the primary interests, and concerns, of the majority of commissioners.

First, for those who do not agree with the Westminster Confession, and want a more contemporary statement of faith, office holders will no longer have to make vows or subscribe to the Westminster Confession and will have the opportunity to propose *new* confessions for inclusion in a Book of Confessions. Second, for those who worry that a change in the status of the Westminster Confession will lead to doctrinal confusion or the loss of our Reformed identity, by *retaining* the Westminster Confession as a subordinate standard, *clarifying* the location of the fundamental doctrines of the faith, and creating new teaching resources on Westminster and the Church's confessional position, we believe that the Reformed identity of the Church of Scotland will be strengthened. Finally, for those who think confessional reform is irrelevant, and a *distraction* from the real task of ministry and mission, our proposed reforms will provide tools for teaching and discipleship, facilitate missional partnership with other denominations, and crucially, resolve a disagreement over the role of the Westminster Confession that has continued for centuries, allowing us to move on to other pressing matters.

Difficult times provide an opportunity, to ask who we are, what we are for, and what God would have us do today.

The Theological Forum hopes that our reflections on creation care and retrospective apology will be helpful to the Church as it seeks to walk humbly and act justly in a complex world, and that our proposals on the Westminster Confession will allow the Church to reform itself by the Word of God, and meet the challenges of the age with confidence, and faith, and renewed hope in Christ.

Moderator - I present the report of the Theological Forum, and as I am not a commissioner, I invite the Principal Clerk to move the deliverance.